



What is Sustainable Development?

**by: Ms. Kyle J. Zieba
Environmental Scientist**

**US EPA Region III
Center for Sustainability**

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The term sustainable development has been widely used in scientific, business, and public institutions since it was first defined in the Bruntland Commission's *Our Common Future* in 1987. Sustainable development in that context refers to "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Since then, the U.N. Commission for Europe issued a Declaration on Sustainable Development in 1990, the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro adopted Agenda 21, and in 1993 the EPA published its report to Congress. Also in 1993, President Clinton created the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD). The PCSD published their final report in 1996 outlining what the United States needs to do to implement strategies which promote sustainable development. However, with all the publicity surrounding sustainable development, few people fully understand what is meant by the term or how to apply it to environmental work and everyday life.

The United States has made great progress in protecting the environment in the last 30 years based largely on a variety of regulatory measures. Federal and state governments have set standards, issued permits for pollutant discharges, and then inspected, monitored, and enforced the standards set for each environmental statute. These measures have improved the lives of all Americans and built a foundation upon which the future of environmental protection must be based. The United States' focus has always been on economic growth using gross national product [exit epa] (GNP) as an indicator of progress. However, long term environmental protection and social equity need to be added into the equation to gauge economic progress more accurately.

Some negative environmental impacts of production and consumption, toxic waste as an example, are considered a credit rather than a debit when calculating GNP. So, the creation of toxic waste is shown as having a positive effect on economic growth as the national ledger stands now. Sustainable development focuses on economic development that goes hand-in-hand with ecological integrity and social equity. Our current economic system based on consumption underscores the fact that natural resources are finite. A child born into the culture of the U.S. will consume 30 to 40 times per capita the energy and natural resources of the "average" of the rest of the world and 200 times as much as several undeveloped countries (Muschett 1997). Consumption needs to be modified for continual economic development to occur today with emphasis on preserving our natural resources for future generations. One concern regarding these definitions of sustainable development is that they do not distinguish between development and growth.

Daly and Cobb compare growth and development stating that "growth should refer to quantitative expansion in the scale of the physical dimensions of the economic system, while development should refer to the qualitative change of a physically nongrowing economic system in dynamic equilibrium with the environment" (Daly and Cobb). There is also a disparity among professionals as to the definition of development. Business representatives often view development as growth and industrialization, while environmentalists often define development in terms of what is sustainable. When a country exploits its natural resources beyond their renewable limit it will experience growth, but not development. There is a need to shift our current economic indicators of success

from consumerism and materialism to ones that take into account the finite limits of resources and people. The search for a way to ensure economic prosperity and environmental integrity begins by connecting the many levels of society.

Sustainable development is less of a program and more of a multifaceted approach to managing our environmental, economic, and social resources for the long term. In its simplest terms, it means adding some new considerations or dimensions to our everyday decisions as a society. These considerations include: what the long-term impacts of a decision are, is the decision sustainable on a local level, and have the economic, social, and environmental impacts been incorporated into the decision? One of the goals established by the PCSD is to "create full opportunity for citizens, businesses, and communities to participate in and influence the natural resource, environmental, and economic decisions that affect them." Federal, state, tribal, and local governments working together to achieve environmental protection goals will set the standard for cooperation between communities, businesses, and governments. This new collaborative decision making process will ensure better decisions, create more rapid change, and promote more sensible use of human, natural, and financial resources. Creating a widely held ethic of stewardship will encourage individuals, institutions, and corporations to take responsibility for the economic, environmental, and social consequences of their actions.

An essential aspect of moving toward an equitable decision making process is creating a citizenry that has access to high- quality, lifelong formal and non-formal education. This can be through schools, colleges, and training facilities as well as museums, libraries, parks, and mass media including the information highway, the Internet. A knowledgeable public with access to the free flow of information and opportunities is critical. It will enable people to understand the interdependence of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity so that they can take actions that support all three. Knowledge of how all levels of government, business, and the public have implemented sustainable development in their communities will help others apply sustainability concepts where they live and work.

Sustainable development considers the prospects of future generations by establishing long term goals. It promotes citizen engagement by supporting civic institutions, networks, pride, and local self-reliance. Through collaboration it sets common values and shared goals by integrating economy, equity, and environment. Helping people make the connection between human and natural systems, using resources more efficiently with technological advancements, and taking a leadership role in the development and implementation of global sustainable development policies are all tenets of the United States' and EPA's approach that will ensure a vital economy, social well-being and a healthy environment for today as well as tomorrow.

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